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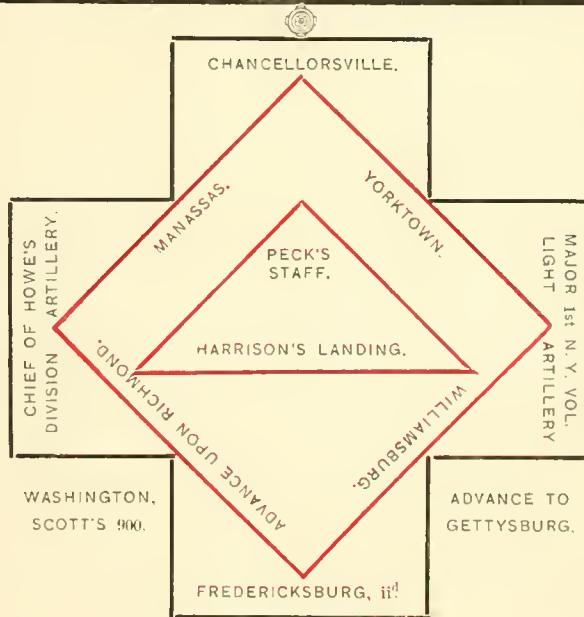
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In Memoriam

BREVET COLONEL U. S. & N. Y. VOL.

John Watts de Peyster, Junior,

DIED 12th APRIL, 1873, at 4.55 A. M.



BY AN OFFICER OF THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC.

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In Memoriam

JOHN WATTS de PEYSTER, Jr.

DIED 12th APRIL, 1873.

"My son, my son,
A father's eyes are looking on thy grave."

* * * * *

"Thro' echoing lands that ring with victory,
Answering for the living with the dead,
And give me marble when I ask for bread,
And give me glory when I ask for thee."

* * *

"Thon knowest why we silent sit, and why our eyes are dim,—
Sing us such proud sorrow as we may bear for him."

"Reach me the old harp that hangs between the flags he won ;
I will sing what once I heard beside the grave of such a son."

—“*A Hero's Grave*,” by SIDNEY DOBELL.

"No further seek his merits to disclose,
Nor draw his frailties from their dread abode ;
There they alike in trembling hope repose,
The bosom of his Father and his God." —GNAY'S "Elegy."

"And thou wert the meekest man, and the gentlest, that ever sat in hall among
ladies. And thou wert the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put lance
in rest." —“*Elegy of Sir Lancelot*,”—MORTE D'ARTHUR.

THE hand that writes these pages does so with the
reluctance of one who feels that he is an intruder on
a sorrow so deep and recent, so sacred in its nature,
that any attempts at consolation in the ordinary sense
of the term were useless. Only at the urgent request

of the head of the family to which the subject of this brief memoir belonged, and against the writer's own wishes, does he attempt the task, feeling sensible, from what little he saw himself of the brief and mournful young life that ended so sadly, that no words of his can heal the wound that God in his wisdom inflicted, when the sword pierced the parents' heart, and the Angel of Death took their first-born.

It is not with the hope of consolation, not with the purpose of trying to palliate inevitable grief by exciting the feeling of pride, that these pages are written. In the face of such a sorrow, only one feeling of the human heart is possible, the deepest and most sincere *sympathy*; a sympathy that would take refuge in silence if it were permitted.

Nevertheless, feeling that the task, however difficult, must be done, and praying earnestly that it may be done in such a way as to render it a grateful tribute of sympathy, I have consented to undertake the preparation of such a slight sketch of one who has gone to his rest, as may serve to remind us of the happiness to which he has attained at last.

"If in this life only we have hope, we are of all men the most miserable," said one whose life, after the commencement of his mission, was a constant succession of trials and sufferings of body and mind, the latter aggravated by the former. Of all the gifts which have come to us with the Second Dispensation, there is one alone which is worth all the rest, the revelation of the recompenses of a future life, for trials

in this. The same Lazarus, who sat at the gate of Dives, a painful and touching spectacle, a poor wreck, whose every moment was a torment, whose life was one long martyrdom, found rest, peace and happiness at last, in Abraham's bosom. If there is one lesson that comes to us in the whole teaching of the Creator of the Universe with more force than another, with more consolation to the suffering in heart than all the rest, it is that bright revelation of God the Compensator, of Paradise the Home of Compensation, which GOD IN MAN has told us of in every chapter, almost every verse, of his recorded teachings.

It is not my purpose, therefore, in these few words of sympathy, to enlarge on the brilliant military record of one who has left all such things far, far behind him. To say that he was brave to excess, is but to repeat the testimony of every comrade in arms that saw him in action. To recount the names and honors that were conferred on him by brevets, for one quality of a many-sided character, is but poor consolation to the desolate hearts that yearned over him from the cradle to the grave.

To say that he was handsome in person, brave and gentle, a lion among men, a lamb among ladies, may be true; but what balm does the memory of beauty and virtue carry with it to those who mourn the loss of all that endeared him to them? In the presence of eternity, how paltry are all such honors; in the presence of death, what consolation can a labored eulogy offer? It is but to increase the sorrow by the

memory of what has been lost. In such a case, only two things are possible—*forgetfulness*, or HOPE.

Which shall be my theme in treating such a sorrow?

The waters of Lethe are deadly cold, fit emblems of the pagan spirit that dictated the fable. “Is there a way to forget to think?” asks the poet, in a dreary apostrophe of woe. The question answers itself. While the brain holds thought, it must hold memory also, and the loss of memory is the loss of reason. To us, who live in the brightness of that light to which all the wisdom of the ancients only shows as a feeble glimmer in the darkness of ignorance, there is a sweeter spring than ever lay, still and dark, in the pool of Lethe.

The pleasures of hope are ours, alike for ourselves in the shadow of death, and in the memory of those who have gone before us on the long journey, from which none return, but which all must take. That hope it was which dried the tears of the warrior monarch of Israel, when he reproved his servants with the simple words, “I shall go to him, but he shall not come to me.”

To me, who came to the record of a sad young life almost as a stranger, at first sight the retrospect was inexpressibly mournful. In all the records accessible to me, there was so much that was a mere recital of perpetual suffering, that it seemed to me as if nothing that could be said or written on the subject could be other than a tearing open of wounds that only time

could heal. Of any real insight into the inner nature of the man himself, whose life I was investigating, there seemed no glimpse possible. His own letters had perished ; the letters of others referring to him, so far as I could find them, were purely in reference to his bearing in action, and all of but one tenor—that that bearing was faultless, that his courage and coolness were remarkable, even abnormal. These letters have been repeated already in the public prints, accompanied with the official commendations of such generals as Hooker and Kearny, names synonymous with daring, even rashness. To show that the character for utter fearlessness which I have attributed to the subject of this memoir, is strictly in accordance with fact, and existed from his early years, these letters are printed in an Appendix herewith. To encumber the body of the narrative with such matters, would seem to me to be unwise.

- One anecdote in this connection I cannot refrain from giving ; I heard it from the Rev. Dr. Oliver himself:

“ When quite a boy, Watts accompanied his brother Frederic, Rev. Mr. Oliver, (under whose care he then was at Altoona, Pa.,) and some others, to visit a coal pit somewhere beyond Pittsburg. The party penetrated so deep into the mine, and lingered so long, that their lights gave out ; and, in the darkness, such as could almost be felt, all the party, and Mr. Oliver, except Watts, became flustered or nervous. Watts, however, so far from experiencing any sensation of the

kind, actually seemed to enjoy the situation, as one which required a solution, which he would like to experience. Finally he suggested, as mules were very sagacious animals under such circumstances, that they should leave the solution to them. They did so, and the mules brought them out. Mr. Oliver wrote to his father about Watts' perfect fearlessness on this occasion."

It is not to courage, not to honors gained in the field, that I trust, to inspire a sentiment of hope, mingled with mournful regret, but still sweet in its very sadness, but to the far tenderer, nobler side of the character of the poor boy who suffered so much, as that side has been latterly revealed to me by glimpses, partly from a few of his own letters, partly from the letters of private friends containing references to his character, from a standpoint outside of the meretricious glare of military events. I saw him alive but twice, each time under the most melancholy circumstances; and the memory of those interviews has added to the light in which I have come to view his character, as a man of much sorrow, now—Heaven be thanked—*at rest*.

JOHN WATTS DE PEYSTER Junior was born in New York City on the 2d December, 1841, with every apparent prospect of a fortunate and happy life before him, a promise that nothing seems to have happened to dim, during his childhood. That he was as happy as most children is to be hoped, for certainly his after-years were full enough of trials.

The first glimpse that I have of the *young man*, I find in a letter to his father, written apparently from New York, just about the opening of that terrible struggle, known as the Great Rebellion. It is entirely on business matters, relating to money ; and yet, at the close comes one little unconscious touch of nature which is irrepressibly affecting to me, who remembers the face and bearing of the poor lad years afterwards. That an ardent love really existed between father and son, I have no doubt. That the father yearned with the strongest affection over his son, is certain. That he craved his affection by word and deed, appears from the passage in the letter referred to, wherein the son answers a complaint of the father :

“ You complain of the cold and business-like form of my letters. You yourself first set the example of dropping the language of affection.”

These words are quoted from memory of their spirit only ; and yet there was something in them that caused the writing to swim before my eyes as I read them ; they conveyed to my mind such a sentiment of dreariness and desolation. A wall of reserve and pride had grown up between two people, both eminently worthy of love, but apparently incapable of understanding each other. The language of affection had ceased between them, at first, possibly, from misunderstanding on the part of the father, offended at morbid reticence and exclusiveness of the son ; and the young heart, too proud and sensitive, clothed itself in the iron panoply of reticence and reserve—a

panoply that, like the shirt of Nessus, injures its wearer worst of all.

That this was the case with the subject of our memoir is evident from the constant references in the letters of others, to his *reticence*. When a lad of twenty is extraordinary for reserve, it may be taken for granted that he is also extraordinarily sensitive. Reticence is not natural to youth. Happy youth is frank as day, headlong in trust, foolish in openness. When a silent, reserved lad is seen, there is little doubt that such a lad is unhappy. He must be hiding his truer nature, from morbid sensitiveness. It may be foolish, it is certain to prove a cause of misery; but he cannot change his nature without help from others. It all depends on his treatment by others, whether he conquers his sensitiveness, or whether it conquers him.

The next letters that come before me are from Washington. It seems that young de Peyster has gone to his cousin, General Philip Kearny, the "one-armed devil," as the enemy called him, and that the latter has allowed him to follow him as volunteer aid. Then it also turns out that the youth has found that glory is not what he thought it would be, and that, in consequence of miscarriage of letters, he is short of money, has no uniform, is subject to various mortifications among a rich and dashing staff, and, in short, finds thorns of discomfort under the rose of military adventure.

Still, these are but slight annoyances to one whose

opening life begins to *feel itself* at last, and blossom forth, unrestrained by criticism, under the light of kindness. General Kearny, a man of many faults, had yet the virtues of a knight, courage and generosity. To his young kinsman he seems to have been the soul of kindness, bringing from the tender-hearted lad in his letters home, expressions of the most enthusiastic gratitude. Under his guidance and care, young de Peyster seems to have passed his only perfectly happy days. The unconscious influence of this happiness breaks forth in two letters home, directed, "Dear Father and Mother," in which the proud, reticent boy loses all his nervous sensitiveness, and prattles foolishly and happily away, like any other frank, light-spirited lad, writing home, intoxicated with the joy of a first campaign, feeling that he is doing a man's duty among men, and doing it worthily.

Judging from the internal evidence of these few letters, I am convinced that, could young de Peyster have remained on his kinsman's staff till the death of the latter, he would have developed into a splendid officer, and probably have been a much happier man. In Kearny, whatever the faults of the latter to others, his young cousin seems to have found a kind and judicious friend, whose influence over him was decidedly beneficial, mentally, restoring a mind grown morbid with self-contemplation, to a tone far more healthy and natural.

Unhappily, this was not to be. Kearny was unable to appoint the young man officially on his staff, and

his first battle—Williamsburg—decided him to send him home. As the General very truly said, he had no right to allow one to expose himself so freely to destruction who had no properly appointed duty to be there; and young de Peyster, without even a second lieutenant's commission, seems to have exposed himself in such a manner as to deserve the soldiers' *soubriquet* of "Kearny's Dare Devil." To use Kearny's own words, "Watts has done enough for grandeur; he has been shot at enough without being regularly commissioned."

Through the influence of his father, a commission as first lieutenant in the 11th New York Cavalry, was now obtained for him, and he seems to have proceeded to service with his regiment at once, working hard to familiarize himself with the various duties of a cavalry officer.

His extreme youth—he was not yet of age—his small stature and boyish appearance seem to have been obstacles in his way, which he felt sensibly, and when, shortly after, his State offers him a position as major in an artillery regiment, he writes to decline it, in the last letter of his which has come under my notice. In that letter he says that he feels he is not fit for the duties of major, being too young, and declines the offer with a simple modesty that shows well for his knowledge of himself.

Unhappily, he was over-persuaded, and this lad of twenty found himself alone once more, in the midst of an inimical regiment, with a colonel who seems to

have looked upon the appointment as an invasion of his rights, captains who were jealous of his extreme youth, with every circumstance against him, and emphatically—from these causes, not his own want of any soldierly attribute—in a false position.

For a short time this was obviated by his being detailed on the staff of General Peck, a good-hearted man, and an old regular officer, who put him on court martial duty, where he seems to have done remarkably well, thanks to an acute mind, and the fact of his having once studied law, which he retained. Indeed, he won the praise and good-will of every officer with whom he associated.

An attack of James River fever sent him home, and he was not able to return to duty till next year, when he was appointed Chief of Artillery to the Second Division of the Sixth Corps, and served as such, with his usual reckless gallantry, on the Fredericksburg Heights, at the battle of Chancellorsville. At the time he was seriously ill, and the exertions he underwent at the battle proved his ruin. From that time forth—in comparison with the past and its goodly promise, his history is almost a blank.

A few references to him occur in letters written by his aunt, and two officers whose home was near his own. The former seems to have loved him most dearly, and to have been especially proud of him in those brilliant days when he served on the staff of Kearny. Both she and Kearny himself remark on the wonderful improvement in the shy, distant, reticent

lad, by his sudden transition to active life. Kearny notices in an early letter this same reticence, which he characterizes as especially unfortunate, "horrid, horrid!" The warm praise with which he mentions the other qualities of his young kinsman, atones, however, for all the discomfort attributable to this one failing of reticence. In spite of it all, the boy-officer seems to have been a great favorite with those who knew him, especially for his generosity and quiet, gentle deportment, his kindness of heart and unselfishness.

After the battle of Chancellorsville occurs a long hiatus. Young de Peyster seems to have been in wretched health, and to have suffered, at times, from that disease which afterwards caused him such acute misery. Whatever the cause, is hidden in mystery. It is probable that he sustained concussion of the brain at Chancellorsville from the near explosion of a shell or spherical case shot or the wind of a round shot, which carried away his cap; but, whatever it be, he does not seem to have been conscious of anything in the excitement of the battle. The letter of General Owens quoted in the Appendix, will show that his position at that battle was one in which few could retain their coolness of head, however cool they might seem outwardly. In the centre of a battery, taken and re-taken, with grape and round-shot flying to and fro, action seems like a dream of blood, and after it is all over, very few men can give a coherent account of the incidents of the fray. Some injury, either to the

brain or nervous system, must have been suffered in this battle by the subject of this memoir, for his conduct thereafter seems to have become entirely changed, as far as I can ascertain. Moody and erratic, subject to strange bursts of ill-temper, and neglecting the ordinary rules of health in the wildest manner, he seems to have speedily sunk into a state of health decidedly alarming.

In a letter to his father from Colonel W——, one of the officers I have spoken of, comes out the fact that the boy-major is in a painful position, with enemies around him to magnify every fault, and threatened with being called before the examining board on the representation of these enemies—a menace they did not dare to press, for they knew that he could pass any such ordeal—however severe—triumphantly.

It was during this time, when nearly out of his mind with continued illness and annoyances of all kinds, that a fracas occurred between him and his temporary commanding officer, in which the latter charged him with the lie direct, and the young major, driven frantic by the injustice and insult alike, challenged his commander. The challenge was refused, the young officer put under a close and needlessly humiliating arrest, with a sentry at the door. He broke the arrest and caned his commanding officer. Result, he was dismissed from the service, without trial or hearing of any kind, by the arbitrary order of the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton.

Here, it might be thought, had set in night the young star that once shone so brightly. A brilliant record of gallant deeds had been blotted out by the hasty act of a moment, an act done in the extremity of desperation against injustice. As far as his enemies were concerned, they had had their will, and succeeded in their plans.

But, thanks to the kind Providence that watches over the nation, a man was then at the head of the American State whose very instinct was for justice, and who at last was reached, and—listened. The result is told so graphically by the Rev. Mr. Oliver, who acted as ambassador in the affair, that I cannot help quoting his words :

“The officer superior to Watts insulted him ; he took a cane to him ; the officer preferred charges, and Watts was dismissed. General Barry and myself went separately to President Lincoln to get him restored. I never saw the President laugh as he did when he became acquainted with the matter. He put his big feet on the table, leaned back, and roared. ‘Come back,’ he said, ‘in six months, and I will see what I can do for you. I have every desire to do all I can, in consideration of the Major’s services and his father’s loyalty ; but I dare not at once restore an officer who has been dismissed for caning a superior officer for using improper language to him ; because, if I did, in less than twenty-four hours, one half of the officers in the Army of the Potomac would be attempting to thrash their superior officers, under similar circumstances.’ ”

The President's words, as I can bear witness, were a truthful commentary on the state of manners among a large majority of the officers in the Federal Army at that period. The custom of duelling has been often called a relic of barbarism; but I cannot help recording my earnest conviction that its decline in the North has been accompanied, in too many instances, by an almost entire loss among men of those courtesies of life which only prevail at present among the small class of people amongst whom the duel is still retained, spite of law, and spite of the influence of a press, teeming with foul epithets, for which no punishment save the duel has yet been found an efficacious preventative.

In the matter in question, in the case of Major de Peyster, it is evident that he was the victim of a man who sheltered himself from just retribution behind a law which recognizes no such thing as delicacy in the intercourse of gentlemen. And such a dismissal as his, in any country, has always been held, by the tacit verdict of society, to be no disgrace, in any sense of the word. Even the shadow of the latter was subsequently removed by the complete and triumphant reversal of the unjust sentence, and the conferring of the brevet of Lieutenant-Colonel and Colonel U. S. Volunteers, on the reinstated officer, for his gallant conduct at Chancellorsville.

Both justice and honor came too late, for the poor, high-spirited lad who had embarked, two short years before, on a career of hope, which then looked so

bright. Illness, mental and bodily, had attained too sure a grasp on him to be shaken off, and he could not return to the army. It was but the beginning of the end. Henceforth, his life seems to have been a gradual going down hill, in pain and weakness, a mental disease gradually becoming worse and worse, and ever picturing on an over-wrought brain the scene of injustice and contumely in which he had been the victim. It was under these trying circumstances that his parents, well-nigh broken-hearted, found their son sent back to them, crushed for life. Everything that wealth and affection could do to divert the mind and restore the body, was tried in vain. The voyages to Europe and to China and Japan that were relied on so fondly, came too late to save him. Only on one occasion did his intellect seem to awaken to its normal state, when in the whirl of a typhoon, the almost sinking vessel in imminent peril, he became once more calm, smiling and rational. It is an evidence of how fierce was the turmoil in his mind when such an elemental strife was necessary to waken it to external objects. All this time his condition of body was one of constant pain, partly from a diseased liver, and the remnants of old malarial fever. Doubtless, with a healthy tone to the system, the mind would have recovered its balance. As it was, year followed year, aggravating all the symptoms, and finally rendering more stringent restraint necessary.

It was under these unhappy circumstances, and within a year of his death, that I first saw the subject

of this imperfect memoir, calling on him with his father, on the latter's invitation. Having only seen, before that time, the portrait of the quick, bright, vivacious young officer, who had been Kearny's pet, I was inexpressibly affected when I saw the melancholy wreck, that was all that remained of the once dashing soldier.

It was under these circumstances that I formed an opinion of his real character, which has only strengthened since I have perused the few remaining seraps of his letters now extant. I say "few," because all letters to him, also all his own papers, memorials, library and collections were utterly consumed with the cottage he occupied upon his father's estate in June, 1866. Several little circumstances, both at that and a subsequent interview, gave me an impression that was inexpressibly pathetic. Under all the cloud of mental disease, which usually brutalizes its sufferers, one thing was noticeable in this poor young fellow—an intense gentleness and consideration for the feelings of others, an intense and innate chivalry of bearing, that seemed to forget his own painful position the instant that the feelings of another were in question. A more delicately courteous person I never met among men in the blessed possession of all their faculties, and especially did I notice, on a subsequent occasion, the habitual reverence which he displayed towards old age, unhappily so rare in our day and country.

It is on these points of his character, as I saw them,

and on the silent, uncomplaining patience with which he bore his lot, that I am able to dwell at last, with so much pleasure, after the mournful record of suffering which I have just closed, gilded only by a brief glimpse of the sunlight of action. In a life which had so little of pleasure, so much of misfortune, and which ended in such deep and apparently unbroken gloom, what is there, what can there be of consolation, of lesson, to us who survey it from the outside?

To me, at least, there is a broad and shining track, leading from that bed of suffering to the home of compensation. If this young gentleman, with all his higher faculties clouded under the veil of diseases which invariably bring to the surface the baser qualities of nature, could impress me, a total stranger, with the gentle and considerate courtesy of his manner, doing the honors of a poor little room with all the simple dignity and kindness of a king in a sumptuous palace, what must not have been the charm of his nature when in the full possession of himself? To be a true gentleman, brave, courteous, unselfish, is given to few men. To be such, is to imitate the truest pattern of a gentlemen that ever walked the earth, the pattern sent us from Heaven itself. To be such is also to court misery, in this world, where selfishness is the rule, and unselfishness the exception. That the subject of this memoir must have been to his inmost essence one of the type of gentlemen of which Bayard was a living exemplar, and of which the essentially

pathetic life of the misunderstood Knight of La Mancha is the ideal, is evidenced to me by one fact.

I have frequently visited patients who were under treatment for mental disease, and my experience has been uniform in regard to their manners and conversation. An intense selfishness generally pervades them; an intense desire to ventilate their fancied wrongs to any one who will listen to them. Courtesy, in its true sense, that of consideration for others, is almost unknown to them.

In the person of the gentleman whose life I have attempted to sketch, I recognized an anomaly among such cases. He seemed only anxious to make his visitor, a stranger, feel at home and at his ease, and sought to evade any painful subject with the refined tact of a man of the best society. Of complaint, in a position eminently painful, even when encouraged thereto in my presence, there was not a solitary word; and, on a subsequent occasion, he exhibited such noble, gentle self-command, such gratitude for the smallest alleviation of an unhappy lot, that he entirely won my heart.

Again I say, if such was the impression made by the nervous invalid, with clouded brain, and higher faculties obscured, what must have been the man himself, had I known him in health? That gentleness and kindness were his normal attributes, that my estimate was not mistaken, I have the unconscious testimony of the only person in the world to whom the shy, reticent boy of former years ever gave his con-

fidence; and to those qualities I turn at last with a satisfaction the greater that they alone constitute the ground of hope for the future.

If Christianity is not all a lie, if the Saviour of Mankind is to be believed, it is in those very qualities of kindness, gentleness, patience under suffering, and unselfishness, that the only acceptable offering lies, under the Dispensation of Love.

The Author of Life does not say, Blessed are the prosperous, the rich, the successful, the men who rise to station in life, at whose feet the nations bow, whose names are spoken aloud in the streets, and sung in the ballads of fame.

What does He say?

Ye who sorrow over a life of pain, listen to the words:

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

“Blessed are ye that weep now, for ye shall laugh.

“Whosoever shall seek to save his life, shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.”

The subject of our memoir lost his life for others. He was gentle and magnanimous, and his life was one of mourning.

God has compensated him for all at last.

F. W.



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